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# **‘With a Friend like this . . .’: Shielding Cameroon from Democratization**

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## **Abstract**

The following paper uses the case-study of Cameroon to examine how critical donors can shield their close allies from pressure to pursue political liberalization. As the wave of democratic reform swept through Africa in the early 1990s, similar to that going through North Africa and the Middle East today, domestic opposition pushed the ruling clique in Cameroon towards pluralism. However, in this case, instead of encouraging democracy, France helped President Paul Biya to maintain his grip on power. As will be demonstrated, massive amounts of French aid helped the regime survive both internal and external pressure for change. Under a political conditionality approach other secondary donors tried to use their foreign assistance to help push for liberal-democratic reforms in Cameroon. However, such efforts are frequently undermined by what the donor perceives as its self-interest. This research attempts to illustrate this general point by examining the relationship between Cameroon and France and the maintenance of authoritarianism in the defense of common interests.

## **Keywords**

Cameroon, democratization, foreign aid, France, political conditionality

## **Introduction**

It goes without saying that the post-Cold War era has seen a dramatic shift away from authoritarianism and towards democratic, multiparty governance in Africa and elsewhere. While this unprecedented democratic change has by no means taken deep roots everywhere, it has been strongly supported by civil society groups across the planet and at least rhetorically supported by much of the international community. In such a light, this paper discusses the tenuous relationship between three critical actors: those providing outside incentives for democratization, the authoritarian governments that want to remain in power, and the pressures that emerge from domestic sources over the desire to move towards democratic pluralism. This interaction, with Cameroon used here as a critical case study, has profound implications not only for Africa south of the Sahara, but for the winds of change currently blowing through North Africa and much of the Middle East.

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While not degrading the impact of domestic civil society actors, it must be pointed out that outside donors can have a significant impact on their aid recipients far beyond the projects they finance. This influence can be used to encourage reform, or it can be deployed to shield aid recipients from change. As a part of this process a political conditionality approach is designed that supports aid beneficiaries' moves towards better governance and democratization using foreign assistance as both a carrot and a stick. Such an effort to invoke political change using aid as a tool flourishes in an environment where various key donors and domestic actors work together in a coordinated effort to achieve a common goal (Emmanuel, 2010). Donors and recipients, however, frequently have mixed motives in their affairs. Donors may like to keep their friends in power, and authoritarian leaders like to maintain their rule. These partners' complex, sometimes intimate, relationships frequently impede the application of the potential source of international pressure for changes in behavior. As will be made clear in this paper, international support for genuine democratic change, through the conditionality process, has been seriously eroded by the behavior of what will be referred to as the 'donor-patron'; that is, foreign aid donors will not pressure their close friends to undergo democratization that may undermine such an important relationship.

This study investigates how realist impulses can undermine the application of political conditionality, specifically on the part of the 'donor-patron,' or the dominant provider in the aid partnership. In doing so, I will specifically examine the close ties between Cameroon and France in the early 1990s, a critical relationship in understanding how democracy has failed, and continues to fail, in Cameroon. This Central African country presents an important case in which aid sanctions were undermined by the behavior of the country's principal aid provider, France. Instead of contributing to the efforts of other donors by encouraging the democratization process underway among civil society groups and the political opposition on the ground in Cameroon, France dramatically increased its aid in an effort to shield the regime of President Paul Biya and to protect it from this combined international and domestic pressure for change.<sup>1</sup> A combination of deep realist self-interest and historic patron-client relations hampered the ability of Paris to pressure one of its close allies in Africa, dashing any attempt to encourage meaningful democratic reform in Cameroon. These actions blocked any attempt to apply political conditionality and this failed transition has had lasting consequences on the evolution of Cameroon's political system. This case illustrates a general rule frequently evoked in the conditionality literature: 'where bilateral relations are close, tied up with donors' own strategic or economic interests, then the effectiveness of aid conditionality is compromised' (Crawford, 2001: 204; Stokke, 1995: 44). This paper will illustrate this general point with a critical historic example.

It is not new to argue that the realist interests of rich donor countries get in the way of more lofty ideals such as democracy promotion or respect for human rights. The very notion that donor self-interest dominates foreign aid allocations is almost axiomatic in the scholarly literature on the subject (Morgenthau, 1962: 301–309; McKinlay, 1979; Hook, 1995; Schraeder et al., 1998; Alesina et al., 2000). Furthermore, recent empirical tests demonstrate that donors are highly self-interested and they frequently use their economic and military aid to reward their friends in return for their support on critical United Nations (UN) votes, trade issues, security links, etcetera (Moon, 1983: 317–320; Lebovic, 1998; Meernik et al., 1998; Schraeder et al., 1998). Some go so far as to posit that the strategic interests of donors fundamentally dominate the direction and the amount of aid flows (Schraeder et al., 1998: 297; see also Black, 1968; Eberstadt, 1988). Donors are clearly quite tempted to shelter a friendly client regime from the storm of conditionality applied by other international aid providers. This undercuts conditionality and the overall efforts of outsiders to encourage democratization.

The concerned donor-patron acts to guard its own interests in their perceived spheres of influence, especially from the intrusion of other donors or even domestic actors in the aid recipient that get in the way of 'business as usual.' Furthermore, it may even be counterproductive for a donor-patron to exercise its leverage and force an aid recipient to undergo democratic change. This could potentially destabilize a beneficial relationship. That is to say, far from desiring to impose conditionality, the donor-patron may plainly wish to block the efforts of other aid providers and protect the friendly recipient regime in power. Cameroon and France provide an excellent example of such a close relationship. As will be discussed later in the paper, most of the scholarship on French foreign policy argues that its aid disbursements have been overtly oriented towards meeting Paris' major foreign policy goals for quite some time (Quinn et al., 2006: 295; see also Hayter, 1966; Tint, 1972; Kolodziej, 1974; McKinley et al., 1978; Aldrich et al., 1989; Lancaster, 1999). Cameroon clearly illustrates this point.

As shall be made evident in the pages that follow, Cameroon in the early 1990s felt the political changes that began to sweep through the continent as the Cold War ended, but efforts to democratize fell short due to a combination of widespread domestic repression and massive electoral fraud by the Biya government, along with international collusion between elites in Paris and Yaoundé. The 1992 elections in Cameroon represent the apex of this process. In the face of the electoral irregularities and human rights abuses in Cameroon, the deployment of political conditionalities was limited to a handful of secondary aid providers. The United States (US) and Germany were the only openly critical donors of the events surrounding the 1992 Cameroonian elections, and they were the only ones to impose aid sanctions in reaction (*Africa Confidential*, 1992b: 6). To protect its ally, Paris countered these moves by dramatically augmenting its grants and loans, bolstering the Biya regime and emboldening the Cameroonian leadership to stand firm against stiff domestic and international pressures. Put in more general terms, the countervailing economic and strategic interests of important bilateral donors can blunt the effectiveness of conditionality (Crawford, 2001: 203).

This paper adopts a case study approach and will be divided into three sections: the first examines Cameroon's domestic political evolution in the early 1990s and the elections of 1992; the second explores donor reactions to events in Cameroon during that period; and the third and final section focuses on the critical relationship between France and Cameroon and how it worked to undermine the application of aid conditionality in the face of pressure for democratic reform pursued by a combination of domestic and international actors. The overarching goal is to use France's behavior towards Cameroon to illustrate a more general point about how critical donors can negatively impact political conditionality by giving in to their own economic and strategic self-interests. This issue goes far beyond the case presented here and is a significant problem for the success of a conditionality approach overall.

## Part I: Cameroon in the Early 1990s

Almost simultaneously with the falling of the Berlin Wall, much of the African political landscape began to undergo a dramatic transformation. Single-party regime after single-party regime across the continent (the regime choice *par excellence* for much of the developing world since the mid-1960s) fell under the combined weight of domestic and international pressures for political liberalization. Cameroon began to feel these historic changes in the early months of 1990.

Deeply inspired by the spectacular political openings of the national conference movements sweeping across many Francophone African countries, such as Bénin, Niger, or Congo-Brazzaville, a group of dedicated Cameroonian political activists gathered in early 1990 to form an opposition

party, which was illegal in the country at the time (Boulaga, 1993; Vittin, 1991). This group of activists, including the former president of the national bar association,<sup>2</sup> Yondo Black, were arrested on 19 February 1990 by security forces and charged with subversion (*Afrique Contemporaine*, 1990a: 85). Their trial, held in front of a military tribunal, nonetheless, grabbed the attention of the entire country (Mehler, 1997: 97). The court rapidly came to a verdict and found Yondo Black guilty of 'holding clandestine meetings' and 'distributing political tracts hostile to the regime' (*Afrique Contemporaine*, 1990b: 88). This trial and verdict seemed extremely excessive considering the momentous political changes that were taking place across Africa and the world at the time.

The challenges to the government's monopoly on power would not stop there. In early April, shortly after this first trial, a group of individuals opposing the Biya regime formed the Social Democratic Front (SDF) – without state permission. Similar to the earlier efforts by Yondo Black, several key SDF militants, including their leader John Fru Ndi, were quickly arrested and put on trial for subversion, again, in front of a military tribunal. Eleven of the activists were found guilty and their sentences were numbered in decades. These trials again demonstrated that President Paul Biya was unwilling to allow a similar level of political liberalization seen elsewhere (*Africa Confidential*, 1990a).

This second legal decision, against the SDF activists, led to widespread public outrage in Cameroon. The group's remaining free leaders, part of an illegal organization in the eyes of the regime, clandestinely called for demonstrations against the guilty verdicts to be held in Bamenda, the capital of the northwest province. Several thousand demonstrators showed up to protest the regime in Bamenda on 26 May 1990 (*Afrique Contemporaine*, 1990b: 88). Immediately, as *Africa Confidential* points out, '[t]he government was terrified that antigovernment demonstrations could spread, East German-style' (*Africa Confidential*, 1990b: 5). To prevent such a contagion the Cameroonian security forces deployed massively in an attempt to quickly control and disperse the gathering. However, as the regime's apprehension led them to believe, events quickly slipped out of their control. The Rubicon of Cameroon's political liberalization had been crossed when security forces violently responded to stone-throwing youths with live ammunition, killing several of them. Through this over-reaction it quickly became apparent that Paul Biya and his clique had lost the support of many Cameroonians for good. The president's sway in the country would be further eroded by events in the months that followed these first Bamenda protests.

After several extremely tense weeks involving regular antigovernment demonstrations, President Paul Biya began to waver in late June. In a surprise move he informed the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM),<sup>3</sup> in their annual congress that the country should prepare for multiparty competition (*Afrique Contemporaine*, 1990c: 312). Biya appeared to be caving in to the widespread domestic and growing international pressures on the regime.

Not coincidentally this unexpected announcement came only a week after the Franco-African summit at La Baule, France. At this meeting, then-French President François Mitterrand argued for a link between political liberalization and access to future development aid from France and other donors. This veiled threat appeared to have a clear impact on Paul Biya's behavior, clearly the desired effect of conditionality's carrot and stick approach. Mitterrand demonstrated that donors can have a significant influence on their aid recipient's conduct. The question remained: would France back this move up with credible action?

Just after La Baule Cameroon's ruling party, in addition to permitting opposition parties, moved to end press censorship, as well as to reduce limitations on freedom of movement and association. These shifts laid the groundwork for the establishment of viable opposition parties. In a further move, the government released the political prisoners held from the Yondo Black and SDF affairs earlier in the year (*Africa Confidential*, 1990c: 6). Were these the signs of real liberalization or

were they designed to buy the Biya regime some breathing room vis-à-vis an increasingly restless Cameroonian populace and a demanding international community?

After extensive debate and some resistance from hardliners within the ruling party, Biya's initiative led to fundamental changes in the Cameroonian political system. The process of democratic liberalization became official on 6 December 1990 as the parliament adopted a law permitting '*pluripartisme intégral*,' or full multiparty politics (*Afrique Contemporaine*, 1991a: 77). This historic legislation ended the dominance of the single-party state in Cameroon, set forth the guidelines for the creation of opposition parties, and laid the groundwork for their participation in the country's political system (Takougang, 2003: 431–432).

This political opening did have its limits, however. Although the regime had announced multiparty politics, shortly after this declaration the government responded harshly to opposition political meetings and demonstrations, arresting journalists and opposition leaders, banning demonstrations, and using police powers to restrict the newly won political freedoms of association and assembly (Bratton et al., 1997: 110). From such confusing behavior, Cameroonians began to ask themselves if this new political order was not just simply a new mask to hide the old face of authoritarianism. Some began to desire to test the reality of these new reforms. The months that followed would see how far the regime was truly willing to go to keep itself in power despite unprecedented and widespread opposition.

The first major test of these constitutional changes did not come from opposition political parties, but from the domestic press. The new media law passed by the Cameroonian National Assembly allowed for increased freedom of expression. However absurdly, the government maintained the right to censure the press at any time (*Afrique Contemporaine*, 1991b: 84). This contradiction was immediately challenged. The most significant confrontation between the press and government came just before the end of 1990 in the form of an editorial published in one of Cameroon's main dailies, by one of the newspaper's most celebrated columnists Célestin Monga. In the article Monga accused President Biya of being overly certain about his hold on power. The government intervened and ceased the printed copies of the edition (*Afrique Contemporaine*, 1991b: 84). Furthermore, Pius Njawe, the editor of the publication, and Monga were both arrested and sentenced to six months in prison for defaming the president. The subsequent trial served to raise tensions in the country and caused many to further question the seriousness of the reforms put in place by the regime. Many concluded that, if the press could not openly be critical of the president, who could?

These events quickly grew beyond their initial scope, and became another critical turning point in Cameroon's political reform process. Unanswered questions began to be raised about how far these changes would be allowed to go. This uneasy situation forced the largest opposition group (although not yet an official, legal political party), the Social Democratic Front, to immediately present the government with an ultimatum: 'either legalize us or we will behave as if we are legal' (Mehler, 1997: 97). From here the ruling party's attempt to control the course of events would further be eroded.

As domestic discontent grew, 1991 would prove to be an extremely testing and bloody year for Cameroon. The process of political liberalization that had begun in 1990 with some trepidation on the part of the government turned into widespread popular revolt by the early spring of 1991. Demands for a national conference along the lines of what happened in Bénin and elsewhere, open to opposition political forces and all currents of civil society, were flatly brushed aside by Biya who clearly viewed this option as potentially being the last nail in the coffin of his political career. The public reaction to the dismissal of a potential constitutional conference was far from positive. The ruling party would have nothing to do with this alternative and began to feel deeper resistance from civil society. These popular demands for change would be met with a heavy hand.



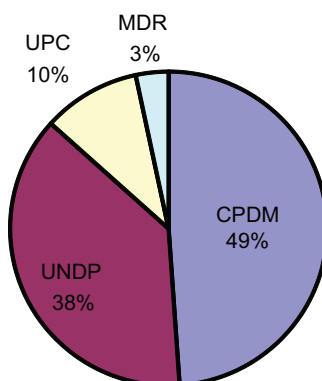
Antigovernment demonstrations began to spread in earnest throughout the country in late April 1991. Talk of imposing a national conference and forcing Biya's removal was spreading like wildfire. By early May, massive nationwide protests paralyzed the country. Furthermore, Cameroon's economy was brought to a standstill by a succession of widely followed general strikes supporting the protests, referred to as '*opérations villes mortes*.'<sup>4</sup> These actions virtually emptied the streets in all of the major cities and towns in the country, except for a series of massive demonstrations. The government did not take lightly to these protests, however. The result was heavy in human life, as opposition demonstrators at times engaged in pitched battles with government security police and army troops, which were deployed *en masse* to quell the disruptions, frequently using lethal force. Estimates put civilian deaths in the hundreds in the spring of 1991 alone (Mehler, 1997: 100). This prompted the government to take the extraordinary measure of putting seven out of the country's 10 regions under direct military control.

As the summer of 1991 approached, many believed that the Cameroonian regime had its back against the wall and that its total collapse was imminent (*Africa Confidential*, 1991a: 5). However, Paul Biya and his entourage proved to be much more resilient than many had expected. The president was able to maintain control of the crisis with several cards up his sleeve: (1) the overwhelming loyalty of the security forces; (2) an adept manipulation of ethno-regional and political cleavages; and, perhaps most importantly, (3) the unwavering support of France, Cameroon's donor-patron. As Biya's hand played out, the second half of 1991 would go to the advantage of the regime. According to Susan Dicklitch (2002: 171) '[t]he campaign of civil disobedience ended in mid-October 1991 following government repression and detention of opposition members and protestors.' Paul Biya at this time looked to consolidate his position in his speech to Cameroonian people on 11 October 1991. In this declaration Biya announced the conveying of the Yaoundé Tripartite Meeting to discuss a limited number of issues, such as access to the media for political parties and changes to the electoral code. The meeting, from 30 October 1991 to 6 November 1991, brought together the key political parties but fell far short of the sovereign national conference demanded by numerous opposition parties and wide swaths of civil society. The lack of progress on concrete politico-constitutional reform caused the opposition Social Democratic Front to walk out of the meetings, declaring that they would only return if their demands for democratic change were met (Social Democratic Front, 1991).

Biya took advantage of his momentary tactical superiority over his opposition adversaries to announce the holding of parliamentary elections only several months later in March 1992, to be followed by presidential elections in October 1992. He hoped that this announcement would finally put an end to the demonstrations that had paralyzed the country for months. His optimism, however, was short-lived. Having counted on opposition exhaustion, Biya was amazed that his announcement of elections was followed by a demonstration of some 50,000 protestors on the streets of Douala, the largest city in Cameroon and the economic capital of the country (*Africa Confidential*, 1991b: 2–3). The opposition organized around the complaint that there was not enough time to organize fair elections.

Faced with tremendous domestic and international pressure for meaningful political reform, President Biya saw the 1992 legislative and presidential elections as an opportunity to restore his legitimacy and quiet his opponents. However, these hopes were put into question by the decision of the main opposition party, the SDF, to boycott the March 1992 parliamentary elections. The SDF underlined three reasons for this decision (*Le Messenger*, 1992: 11; Takougang, 1996: 57). First, they felt that opposition parties were at a disadvantage because of the short amount of time given to organize an effective election campaign. Second, the SDF leadership contended that the electoral districts had been drawn to give an advantage to the ruling CPDM party. Third, the new





**Figure 1.** Cameroonian legislative elections (1 March 1992)

(60.6% participation)

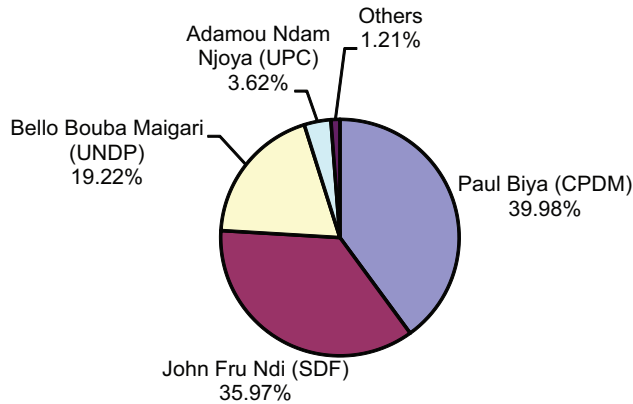
Source: African Elections Database, [http://africanelections.tripod.com/cm.html#1992\\_Presidential\\_Election](http://africanelections.tripod.com/cm.html#1992_Presidential_Election)

electoral system for the legislature was changed from a proportional regional list system to a first-past-the-post, plurality one, undermining the chances of smaller parties of being represented in the national assembly. Regardless of the Social Democratic Front's boycott, Cameroon's first multiparty election since the 1960s took place on 1 March 1992. However, the results of the election would come as something of a surprise to many domestic and international observers.

In a clear indication of the government's unpopularity, the ruling CPDM party secured only a plurality of the electorate, winning a total of just 88 seats in the 180-member National Assembly (or 48.9%; see Figure 1). The regime was unable to secure an outright majority. Amazingly, this clear defeat of the CPDM came regardless of a boycott by the SDF, and in the face of evident government manipulation of the electoral process. The conditions had seemed perfect for a victory by Biya's forces, but none was to be had. This reality meant that, in order to secure a majority and pass legislation, the incumbent CPDM would need the support of at least one opposition party. However, this was not a problem for Biya's domestic patronage machine.

The main opposition party in the election, the National Union for Democracy and Progress (UNDP), captured 68 seats (or 37.8%) of the vote mainly in the Muslim north of the country, while the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC) won 18 seats (10%) primarily in the Littoral and west provinces. Instead of turning towards these relatively large formations, the CPDM entered into a coalition with a smaller northern-based party, the Movement for the Defense of the Republic (MDR), which won only six seats in the poll. This was enough to secure Biya's party a majority with minimal concessions. Together the CPDM and MDR formed a narrow majority coalition by only four seats (94 of 180 seats or 52.2%). To cement the deal between the two parties, Biya used patronage to win over the support of key individuals, offering ministerial posts to their partners in the coalition (Dicklitch, 2002: 165). In handing out these favors, Biya was forced to dramatically increase the size of his executive cabinet, from 25 seats to 37. This was done to pay back clients who were crucial for maintaining a majority in the legislature, not to mention as a boost to Biya's questionable post-election legitimacy among the country's political elite. However, the president's authority and legitimacy would be even more dubious after the presidential elections.

In a further blow to the ruling clique, the incumbent, Paul Biya, won an anemic plurality in the 11 October 1992 presidential contest, garnering only 39.98% of the Cameroonian electorate (*Africa Research Bulletin*, 1992a: 10,745). This time the candidate from the SDF, John Fru Ndi, participated



**Figure 2.** Cameroon Presidential Elections (11 October 1992)

(71.9% participation)

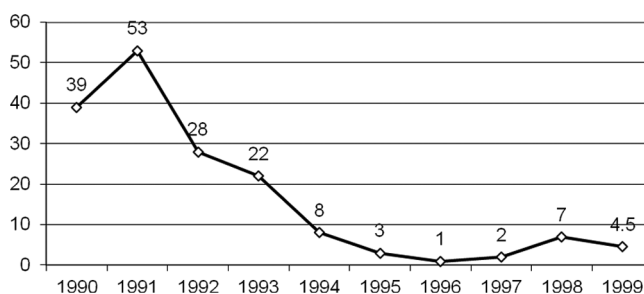
Source: African Elections Database, [http://africanelections.tripod.com/cm.html#1992\\_Presidential\\_Election](http://africanelections.tripod.com/cm.html#1992_Presidential_Election)

and almost won the poll.<sup>5</sup> In the end, just fewer than 120,000 votes separated the winner, Biya (with 1,185,466 votes) from the runner-up, John Fru Ndi (with 1,066,602 votes; African Elections Database, 1992; see Figure 2).

The results closely followed the regional, linguistic, and ethnic lines seen in the parliamentary poll. Biya's support focused in the center, south, and east provinces, mainly around the Beti people. John Fru Ndi secured the vast majority of his votes from the northwest, southwest, as well as from the Littoral and west provinces (Takougang, 1996: 60). However meager, even these weak results were still enough for Paul Biya to win with only 39.9% of the vote, given that the presidential electoral law called for a single round, winner-take-all, plurality system.

Biya's victory was not without contestation. The day following the poll John Fru Ndi, among others, alleged widespread fraud and denounced the elections as having been rigged. He 'claimed the government had stuffed ballot boxes, altered electoral lists and distributed inadequate ballot papers for the opposition' (*Financial Times*, 1992). Shortly after the announcement of the winner, demonstrations and some rioting broke out across the country (*Afrique Contemporaine*, 1993: 71). These protests were met with the declaration of a state of emergency and the deployment of thousands of troops. This crackdown led to a massive wave of arrests of opposition activists, journalists, and any demonstrators caught protesting the election results (*Afrique Contemporaine*, 1993: 72). In the process security forces killed three protestors in the city of Bamenda (*Africa Research Bulletin*, 1992a: 10,744). In a further crackdown, the SDF leader John Fru Ndi was placed under house arrest after having called for popular protest of the election results (*Africa Research Bulletin*, 1992d: 10778).

Unlike a year before in 1991, these demonstrations did not generalize across the country. For the most part, protesting was contained to SDF strongholds and was short-lived. As one scholar points out, 'there was no sustained countrywide protest after the 1992 elections. Certainly the ability of the Biya regime (aided by French aid) to withstand the *villes mortes* campaigns deflated opposition hopes of . . . unseating Biya' (Dicklitch, 2002: 172). It appeared that all hopes were dashed for an East German or a Béninois-style popular overthrow of Biya, or even an electoral coup. However, several new actors would pick up the mantle of criticizing the Biya regime and its behavior where domestic opposition left off. Now it was the international donor community's turn to express disapproval. Their reaction was dominated by concerns that the Cameroonian government had resorted



**Figure 3.** US Bilateral official development assistance (ODA) to Cameroon  
(Millions of current US\$)  
Source: OECD (2008)

to substantial fraud and repression to ensure electoral victory (*Africa Research Bulletin*, 1992a: 10,744).

## Part II: The Impact of Donors on Cameroon's Political Evolution

To begin with, the German parliament decided on 9 November 1992 to be the first donor to suspend some of its bilateral aid projects with the Biya government because of the aforementioned behavior (Agence France-Presse, 1992a). Germany reduced its aid from \$50 million in 1992 to just over \$30 million in 1993, a drop of some 40% (*Africa Confidential*, 1992b). They expressed their disquiet over 'President Biya's actions against the opposition . . . and . . . fraud during the recently-held presidential elections' (*Africa Research Bulletin*, 1992c: 10802). Germany also attempted to influence the European Union (EU)'s assistance, but France blocked these efforts. In the end the EU only made 'veiled threats but took no action' against Cameroon (Crawford, 2001: 178). Several weeks after Germany moved to sanction its development assistance, the United States decided to exercise its own conditionality approach towards the Cameroonian government and the aid it provided to Yaoundé.

During much of the 1980s, United States economic assistance to Cameroon mirrored the amounts of that country's primary donor, France, at approximately \$50 million annually. The events of the early 1990s would dramatically change this pattern. Because of the regime's behavior, the United States imposed aid sanctions in line with a conditionality approach on Yaoundé shortly after the 1992 presidential poll. As demonstrated in Figure 3, the actions of the Biya regime in the early 1990s had a significant impact on US economic aid disbursements to Cameroon. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the economic assistance to the Central African state from the United States was reduced from \$53 million in 1991 to \$28 million in 1992 (or a decline of 47%). American aid virtually ended after 1993, except for limited amounts of humanitarian assistance given directly to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). US economic and military aid to Cameroon would remain virtually nonexistent for the remainder of the 1990s. Furthermore, in 1994 the USAID liaison office in Cameroon was closed permanently.<sup>6</sup> In its reasoning for the dramatic reduction in relations, the US State Department cited its concerns over human rights abuses and the pace of political liberalization.

The Clinton Administration decision to impose political conditionality came after a group of US election observers from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) for International Affairs reported a 'number of serious problems' with the 11 October 1992 presidential elections (NDI,

1993). They concluded that the poll was far from free and fair (*Africa Research Bulletin*, 1992b: 11060). According to the NDI election monitoring group, the Cameroonian government had created a situation in which the elections guaranteed that Paul Biya would win, regardless of the true outcome (*Africa Research Bulletin*, 1992b: 10778). In all, the NDI detailed a series of allegations of irregularities surrounding the presidential election. They accused the ruling party of: packing the National Electoral Committee with members of the ruling-party; not completing voter registration processes; issuing multiple voting cards to certain individuals; creating major imbalances for access to state-owned media (142 minutes of television for ruling party and only 12 minutes for all six opposition candidates combined); altering the location of polling stations just before the election; a shortage of ballot papers at polling stations; not opening voter registers to observers; and unreasonably delaying the vote-counting process (*Africa Research Bulletin*, 1992a: 10,744).

Following the elections, then US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher issued a stern warning concerning this situation, accusing the Biya regime of 'using intimidation to strengthen his position, after the presidential election which was beset by fraud' (*Africa Research Bulletin*, 1992f: 10802). Accompanying its deployment of political conditionality, Washington asked the Biya regime to immediately end the state of emergency and to release the SDF opposition leader John Fru Ndi from house arrest. If this was done, the US would recommence normal bilateral relations (Agence France-Presse, 1992b; also see *Africa Research Bulletin*, 1992e: 10839). As can be imagined, this seriously soured relations between Washington and Yaoundé. In response to the American condemnation, Cameroon withdrew its ambassador to Washington, Paul Pondi, and the Foreign Minister Roger Booh Booh summoned the United States ambassador Frances Cook to complain about American interference in Cameroon's domestic affairs, suggesting that she openly supported John Fru Ndi during the elections (Agence France-Presse, 1992b).

This conditionality approach applied on aid to Cameroon by Germany and the United States had only a limited impact on the Biya regime. The related aid sanctions by these secondary aid providers were nothing more than a symbolic drop in the bucket when compared to the colossal inflows of economic assistance from France in the period 1992–1995. As will be demonstrated in the next section, only one donor is truly important in Cameroon's policy-making calculations: France.

### Part III: The French Donor-Patron and Cameroon

Even after nearly a half century since independence, France remains very much present in Africa south of the Sahara. As Hook indicates:

France still swaggers in Africa . . . it is the only colonial master that never went home . . . French civil servants manage African government ministries. French businessmen are building skyscrapers, the ports, the industry. It is possible in a dozen African cities to sit in a café on a boulevard named de Gaulle and scan a copy of *Le Monde*. (1995: 55)

Similar to the United States' Monroe Doctrine and its perceived historic hegemony in Latin American affairs, France preserves extremely tight bonds with a number of its former colonial dependencies in Africa and dislikes any outside interference in the affairs of its clients. France views its ex-colonies in Africa as its '*pré carré*,' critical to its overall foreign policy. Countries such as Cameroon, Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, etcetera are also commonly referred to in French policy circles as their own personal '*chasse gardée*,' or private hunting reserve, underlining the deeply patrimonial links that still exist between the former metropole and its 'periphery.' French aid is also

concentrated in maintaining these ties. For decades after independence 'the top 10 African recipients of French aid . . . were all former French colonies or protectorates' (Schraeder et al., 1998: 317).

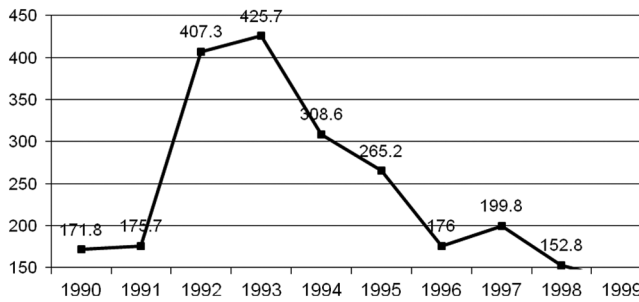
It is clear why some lesser-developed countries might want to maintain relations with a rich donor like France. But why should France care about these relatively marginal players on the international scene? It is because Paris is keen on ' . . . maintaining a political clientele [that] has proved useful to France, in international institutions, because it has given it the rank and the prestige of a medium size power. . . ' (Conte, 1997: 141). These African clients allow France to play a larger role in the world than it would otherwise be able to without them. This is why countries like Cameroon matter in French foreign policy.

French foreign aid is an integral part in maintaining these relationships. Some have even argued that Paris' cooperation policy practiced under the Fifth Republic is the main instrument of French foreign policy power politics (Bayart, 1984; Adda et al., 1989). 'Official development assistance (ODA) has become an important tool in reviving the country's status abroad. French leaders concentrated on their existing spheres of influence in the Third World, particularly in francophone Africa . . . ' (Hook, 1995: 51). Furthermore, the literature suggests that 'foreign aid constitutes one component of a remarkably integrated system of economic relationships . . . that was predicated on maintaining and enhancing a network of ties within the francophone world' (Schraeder et al, 1998: 301). Aid greases the wheels of a deeper patron-client alliance.

While France has favored friendly regimes in its ex-colonies with substantial aid flows, in the 1990s Paris concentrated its scarce assistance resources on several pivotal allies, most notably Cameroon, Sénégal, and the Côte d'Ivoire (Conte, 1997: 139). These relatively large regional powers in sub-Saharan Africa received much more attention than smaller former French colonies on the continent, such as Bénin or Mali, for example: both excellent examples of successful transitions from authoritarianism to multiparty democracy. Yet this was the policy outlined by Mitterrand at La Baule: aid should go to democratizers. Aid flows show that it was not. This concentration of resources is out of the desire to maintain political stability among its close allies on the continent, which is critical to France's relationship with Africa. The loss of an important friendly regime has real costs for French diplomacy. Cameroon falls flatly into this category, and pressure to democratize threatens the bond between leaders in Yaoundé and Paris, which is facilitated by the Biya regime.

That is to say, more than just state-to-state relations, it must be added that French leadership holds close personal relationships with particular critical African elite. These friendships facilitate interactions between capitals. Elite in each country can draw on these contacts in an emergency or when a new business deal is in the works. A friendly voice in the Elysée Palace is only a phone call away. Some have gone even farther to call these relations between France and Africa as part of a much larger patron-client system frequently referred to as 'la Françafrique' (Verschave, 2000, 2003). Such bonds clearly played an important role in the democratic reform crisis in Cameroon, and this case raises more general questions about France's role in Africa. Paris' massive support during the period in question shows their acquiescence to a particular style of rule, and more centrally to a particular group of leaders. In essence, through its extensive aid to Cameroon, France condoned the behavior of the Biya regime and significantly helped it maintain control.

As Cameroon came under intense domestic and international pressure to open the country's political system to multiparty competition beginning in 1990, Paris moved in to help its friend and client. While other bilateral donors were pulling their aid out and investors were fleeing the instability in droves, Paris reacted to shore up the position of its long-time ally, President Paul Biya, by dramatically increasing its foreign aid, forgiving outstanding debt, paying off creditors such as the World Bank, and convincing the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to increase



**Figure 4.** French Bilateral ODA to Cameroon

(Millions of current US\$)

Source: OECD (2008)

Cameroon's country quotas. Some go so far as to claim that 'France holds the key to political developments in the country: if Paris closes the financial pipeline, few believe Biya's government would survive' (*Africa Confidential*, 1992b: 6). Clearly Biya was able to maintain his hold on power and resist domestic and international pressure because of French assistance, demonstrated by the dramatic increases in bilateral ODA flows seen in Figure 4.

However, France's behavior in Cameroon severely contradicted the policies laid out by Francois Mitterrand at the Franco-African Summit in June 1990. There, the former French president argued for a conditionality approach, saying that Paris would focus its foreign aid on those countries which were engaged in democratization (i.e. reducing it to those not undertaking reform; McKesson, 1993: 58). Yet when confronted with concrete foreign policy choices, French leaders have been much more willing to prop up their friends and allies on the continent than to defend the abstract idea of multiparty democracy that could potentially undermine such close relationships (Smith, 2006: 70). As Schraeder et al. (1998: 318) point out, 'In essence, as long as authoritarian leaders continued to underscore their commitment to close ties with France, they were unlikely to find themselves under heavy pressure from Paris to democratize.' This behavior seriously undermined widespread domestic opposition and the use of political conditionality in Cameroon and elsewhere. Furthermore, Cameroon exemplifies the Elysée Palace's retreat from what Mitterrand argued for at La Baule, severely undermining their credibility on the matter of using aid to encourage democratization (*Africa Confidential*, 1993: 4). While France had been at the forefront in demanding change in Africa at the end of the Cold War, Cameroon showed the world that the Parisian foreign policy circles were more interested in symbolic rather than real political change, especially the kind that did not interfere with their economic and strategic interests.

Biya, a reluctant reformer to say the least, certainly benefited from France's help, and probably continues to maintain power because of Paris' double-talk and money. Amazingly, even significant human rights abuses and rampant electoral fraud could not deter his French backers. As the bi-monthly *Africa Confidential* (1992a: 4) indicates, 'Regardless of Biya's behavior there appears to be no diminution in French support.' More importantly, 'when Cameroon's economy was nearly crippled and the regime seriously threatened, it was France that moved quickly to provide financial support for the regime, thus preventing it from collapsing' (Takougang, 2003: 432). Mitterrand acted as kingmaker in Cameroon during the chaos of the early 1990s, crushing any real chance of a genuine democratic transition. The former French president preferred to maintain his personal friend, Paul Biya, in power instead of the uncertainties of multiparty democracy and the potential victory of unfriendly forces. This relationship is unchanged almost two decades later. For these reasons France is the only international actor that seriously counts in Biya's policy calculations.



Even more amazingly, while the international community, led by the US and Germany, was calling the 1992 presidential election a farce, France's foreign ministry sent a letter congratulating Paul Biya's victory (Huband, 1993; Krieger, 1994: 625; Gros, 1995: 118). Today this relationship remains strong, with Biya still in power.

In regards to bilateral aid flows, the French reaction to the instability of the early 1990s in Cameroon was dramatic, to say the least. The massive wave of economic assistance from France, as seen in the previous figure, submerged the relatively small trickle of funds coming from secondary donors like the United States or Germany (even before sanctions). For much of the early 1990s, France's aid distributions to Cameroon represented the second most important destination of French aid worldwide, slightly behind that of the Côte d'Ivoire. Paris was by far the number one donor to Biya's Cameroon, granting \$2.4 billion between 1990 and 1999 (with over half of that being allocated in the critically tumultuous period of 1992–1995) while other donors were suspending their aid. The French Republic's assistance dwarfed that of the next most important provider, the United States, by some five and a half times. Furthermore, France reacted to the instability surrounding Biya's reign by more than doubling its annual aid, which increased from \$175 million to \$407 million. In the four years between 1992 and 1995, Paris disbursed \$1.4 billion, or about \$106 per Cameroonian (given a population of 13.2 million).

Without a doubt, French aid resources helped Biya's regime to maintain control during the extremely chaotic early 1990s. Not only was this extraordinary external support useful in fending off the widespread domestic demands for his removal, but it also allowed the Cameroonian president to ignore pressures from other donors like the United States. 'The primary reason for the dramatic increase in French aid was to ensure Biya's victory, especially as the most popular opposition candidate was John Fru Ndi, an anglophone politician perceived as a threat to French interests in Cameroon' (Schraeder, 2000: 395; see also Agir Ici et Survie, 1996).

Generally speaking, the actions of donor-patrons, like France, have undermined the efforts of the international community which, over the past decade, has increasingly sought to use an aid conditionality approach in an effort to leverage liberal democratic change in authoritarian regimes such as Biya's Cameroon, a country that remains ranked with some of the most authoritarian regimes on the planet (Freedom House, 2011). In 2012 President Paul Biya will have ruled for 30 years, one of the longest reigning heads of state on the planet. To date, the efforts of the international community along with the determination of Cameroonian opposition and civil society to dislodge President Paul Biya and his entourage have clearly failed.

## Conclusion

It appears obvious from the preceding discussion that Cameroon's political reform process was not positively influenced by the application of political conditionality, but that the democratization process was undermined primarily because of the behavior of the donor-patron, France. Cameroon has yet to experience significant democratic change. That is to say, all of the internal struggles and external interventions that took place in this Central African country in the early 1990s amounted to nothing, and France's behavior should squarely take part of the blame. Yet however responsible France may be, it must be pointed out that, in the end, the real responsibility for Cameroon's lack of democratic change must be placed upon the Biya regime itself. Paris only eagerly aided Biya's swindle. His willingness to resort to fraud, massive use of corruption, and repression all combined to make Cameroon's political liberalization a deeply flawed process that lingers today, making politics something of a sick joke in the country.

Some donors did sanction their aid to Cameroon. This did result in reductions in their economic assistance to Yaoundé, and these aid providers hoped that this action would encourage change in



the authoritarian nature of the regime by sending a clear signal of disapproval. Yet these secondary actors lacked the necessary leverage to persuade President Paul Biya to facilitate a true democratic opening in the country. Their limited influence was even more reduced by the behavior of France, which played an extremely corrosive role in Cameroon's abortive liberalization process. The massive influx of French aid and other forms of support helped the Biya regime to thwart the efforts by Cameroon's domestic political opposition and the donor community to encourage real, lasting democratic reform.

If there is one lesson that is to be learned from the case of Cameroon concerning the application of political conditionality, it is that donors must coordinate their activities as widely as possible with domestic actors, and especially with aid providers that are close to the recipient, the so-called donor-patrons. Furthermore, for a conditionality approach to work and encourage lasting political reform, donors must be able to overcome their realist impulses, as difficult as some may perceive it to be. However, as France demonstrated in the case of Cameroon, it is hard to turn your back on a client in which you have significant reciprocal interests. This generalization should cause some to take pause as we watch what happens in North Africa and the Middle East today.

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### Notes

1. Paul Biya has had a long political career in Cameroon. He first served in the government of President Ahmadou Ahidjo in the early 1960s. Eventually, he became prime minister in 1975 and President of Cameroon when Ahidjo resigned in 1982.
2. *Bâtonnier* in French
3. The CPDM is the only legally recognized party in Cameroon. Cameroon became a de facto one-party state in 1966 and was dominated by the country's most powerful political party, the Cameroon National Union, a grouping of six different political parties. The Cameroon National Union changed its name to the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement in 1985 and became the CPDM. Paul Biya has been the president of the party, since his ascendancy to the position of chief executive in 1982. The CPDM exists primarily as an appendage of President Paul Biya's political machine, facilitating cooptation and his patron-client network.
4. Literally translates as 'dead city operations,' and refers to massive general strikes in which people do not go to work and stay at home as much as possible.
5. Some say that he actually did win and was denied victory because of electoral fraud.
6. Officially the USAID office was closed by the Clinton administration for 'budgetary reasons.'

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